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ABSTRACT

The Harvard Adult Literacy Initiative was established in the Harvard University School of Education through the university's Reading Laboratory in 1987. Basic goals of the initiative are to: provide professional training and find effective procedures for training teachers and administrators in the field of adult literacy; conduct research; develop materials for instruction, assessment, and evaluation; and explore the use of technology and media to enhance instruction. The teacher training aspects of the initiative were undertaken first. For the past 3 years, a course has been offered jointly by the Harvard Reading Laboratory and the Extension School for both graduate and undergraduate credit to train teachers and volunteers who work with adults at literacy centers. The course includes a practicum in which students diagnose and teach reading to adults under close faculty supervision. The course serves three purposes--providing training for professional and volunteer personnel, supplying a service for adults who want to learn to read, and generating research data for studying adult literacy. The course was made available through the Extension School to a broad group of people at a modest fee. An outreach effort made to attract adult literacy clients received excellent response. Waiting lists were established for persons wishing to take the course and those wishing literacy instruction. The model developed can be adapted for use by other colleges of education to respond to the issue of adult literacy. (KC)

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DEVELOPING READING ABILITY IN ADULTS: AN APPROACH TO TRAINING PROFESSIONAL AND VOLUNTEER TEACHERS A SYMPOSIUM - PART I

The Harvard Adult Literacy Initiative
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INTRODUCTION

We are witnessing today an unprecedented level of interest in the issue of adult literacy. The level of interest is most remarkable in the breadth of response from various segments of society. Two bills in the Congress of the United States are witness to the movement of the issue from the arena of social concern to public policy. Interest in adult literacy is not new, but having attention from government, business and industry, educators, researchers, social scientists, and a socially conscious public simultaneously,is new (1).

A major response to the problem of adult illiteracy has been traditionally through community volunteerism (2). Volunteers are a critical component of the response to the problem. But volunteers need to be well trained (3,4). In addition, a serious commitment to professionalizing the field, and the development of a strong, validated knowledge base that could inform practice and management in the field is needed. Colleges and universities, especially research universities, can contribute to the knowledge needed to investigate problems, inform the field, and train professionals. Better links need to be formed between the literacy service providers and the research and teaching institutions of higher learning. The Harvard Adult Literacy Initiative grew out of this perspective.

Today I will describe how one university has attempted to respond to this need. I will describe how the Initiative was established, our goals and objectives, and the context in which we operate. In particular, I will describe how we established

the training aspects of our Initiative. The model I will describe is one that is easily replicated.

HOW THE HARVARD ADULT LITERACY INITIATIVE WAS DEVELOPED

In 1986, recognizing that concern with adult literacy was growing, Harvard University President Derek Bok requested that Professor Jeanne Chall, Director of the Harvard Reading Laboratory, find out what Harvard might do to respond to the problem of adult literacy without duplicating existing efforts. Professor Chall and her assistants reviewed much of the existing literature on the issue and conducted a survey of literacy centers and organizations to determine the needs and perceptions of need. A report of this survey was subsequently published in Kappan Magazine.

The results indicated that in addition to sorely needing funding, centers saw a critical need for trained personnel to teach adults to read (5). There was both a lack of trained professionals and a lack of training opportunities. This need was consistent with the national picture. A 1987 report from the Division of Adult Education in the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), for example, showed that over 90% of adult education program staff were volunteers and part-time teachers. They further noted that, "High turnover among part-time instructors and volunteer tutors has the potential for reducing program commitment...(and) effectiveness...." (6)

Literacy center personnel who were interviewed for the Chall survey also requested basic research that could inform and direct their activities and help them be more effective in responding to the problems of adult illiterates. There was a need for reliable and validated diagnostic and assessment instruments and good instructional materials.

As a result, the Harvard Adult Literacy Initiative (HALI), was established in 1987, under a seed grant from President Bok. It is run within the School of Education through the Reading Laboratory. An Advisory Board of people with various expertise, including a representative from the community, was appointed to guide its efforts.

A basic thrust of the Initiative is to provide professional training and find effective procedures for training teachers and administrators in the field, conduct research, develop materials for instruction, assessment and evaluation, and explore the use of technology and media to enhance instruction.

The teacher training aspects of the Initiative were undertaken first. For the past 2 1/2 years, a course has been offered jointly by the Harvard Reading Laboratory and the Extension School for both graduate and undergraduate credit, to train teachers and volunteers who work with adults at literacy centers. The course is modelled after one which has been given by the Reading, Language and Learning Disabilities department for nearly 25 years. It includes a practicum in which students

diagnose and teach reading to adults who seek help, under the close supervision of faculty. The course serves three purposes. It provides training for professional and volunteer personnel who wish to work with adults, it provides a service for adults in the community who need assistance in learning how to read, and it provides research data for studying adult literacy.

By offering the course through the Extension School, we were able to make it available to a broad array of people in the community and at a modest fee. In addition, the Extension School offered scholarships to some personnel from the literacy centers. Harvard undergraduate students who are members of Phillips Brooks House, an organization that volunteers social services to the greater Boston community, were given credit for the course towards graduation.

OUTREACH EFFORTS : THE CLIENTS AND STUDENTS

The Extension School was mainly responsible for advertising the course to prospective students. In addition to the usual methods, they did a special mailing of their catalogue to literacy centers, with a cover memo highlighting the course and announcing the scholarship opportunities for center personnel. Response to the first offering of the course by prospective students was excellent. Twice as many students applied as could be accommodated.

The survey by Chall had found that literacy centers had long waiting lists of clients they were unable to serve, as well as clients whose reading problems they were not equipped to handle. Therefore, we had expected that the client base for the lab course would come from this overflow. In addition, the regular section of the Reading Lab, which mainly serves children, had always had a few adults who were self-referred. We therefore assumed we would have more than enough clients for the adult section of the Lab. However, an increase in state and national publicity about adult literacy and the mounting of a state-wide literacy campaign generated large numbers of volunteers at the local literacy centers. Centers found their waiting lists of clients had dwindled. Nevertheless, state and local statistics indicated there was a sizeable number of adults in the area in need of literacy help who were not being helped.

We therefore mounted a strong outreach effort to attract adult clients to the Lab through public service announcements on T.V. and radio. Flyers were mailed to public service agencies, parole boards and religious organizations that provided social welfare services. Within the university itself, information about the Initiative was mailed to deans, heads of the various service organizations and personnel offices. We requested that they disseminate the information among their staff. Confidentiality of services was stressed. Flyers with a minimum of written information, designed to communicate with potential

clients were posted in nearby public places with the cooperation of merchants and business people in the community.

The response was excellent. Most clients were self-referrals generated through the public service announcements. Others were referred from welfare agencies and some literacy centers sent us "difficult" cases they felt unequipped to handle. Many more clients applied than could be accommodated, and these were put on a waiting list. We have continued to maintain such a list since then, although we alert applicants to alternative sites for receiving help if they are anxious to begin getting assistance. While we do not attempt to become a full blown resource for referrals, we do maintain a list of volunteer literacy and state agencies that can be helpful to people. We also inform callers of the state's literacy hot-line and suggest they call if their need is pressing.

Recruiting and holding clients has been identified as a major problem by the USDOE and by most literacy centers in the community and workplace(7,8). Yet our course has experienced very little loss of clients. About one client out of 15 leave before completing the semester, usually because of relocating or a change in job schedules.

We have also experienced a very low rate of absenteeism. The reasons for erratic participation in literacy programs are complex. Statistics gathered by the Division of Adult Education in 1987 from centers in 42 states showed that over half the

participants left before completing their objectives (9). Causes for leaving varied. Health problems, day care, transportation and lack of interest each were given as reasons about 6% of the time. Changed address accounted for about 13%. Family problems, class schedule and location were given less than 5% of the time. The category "other reasons" accounted for 55.4% of the reason for leaving. Clearly, we need to examine what conditions lead individuals to seek literacy training and remain until their objectives have been completed.

The Initiative seeks the cooperation and involvement of local literacy centers in the community in identifying areas where research is needed. In addition, HALI staff members participate on advisory boards of state, professional and community organizations concerned with literacy issues, and serve on state committees that support and fund local literacy efforts.

FUTURE PLANS

A goal of the Initiative is to collaborate with and serve as a resource to national, state, and local organizations concerned with adult literacy. However, the major objective of HALI will continue to be the teaching of adults who have insufficient literacy, and the development of the most effective assessments, methods, and materials to do so. What we learn, and the resulting products, we hope to disseminate widely.

We hope our work can benefit organizations that deliver services or make policy. We now draw on the School of Education -- particularly the Reading program and the Reading Laboratory -- and the Extension School, but we have the potential for drawing on the existing expertise in other Harvard schools such as the Law School, the Business School, and the Kennedy School of Government, in a cooperative effort to address the problems that intertwine with illiteracy.

I have described one approach that colleges and universities can take in responding to the needs of adult literacy in a community. The model presented is one that could be adapted to fit available resources. The currently identified dimensions of the problem of adult literacy facing our nation suggest that more colleges and universities, and especially schools of education, need to respond to the issue of adult literacy in a professional manner.

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